



October 13, 2019

Sermon Series: **our** church. **our future.**

God Makes Room for People to Gather
Pastor Vern Christopherson

Genesis 18:1-14 NRSV

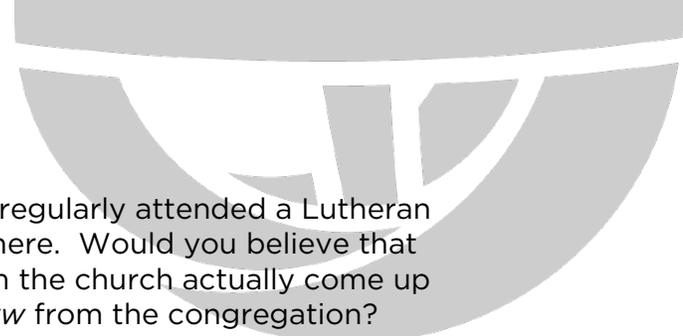
The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. ²He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. ³He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. ⁴Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. ⁵Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." ⁶And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." ⁷Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. ⁸Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

⁹They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." ¹⁰Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. ¹¹Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. ¹²So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" ¹³The LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' ¹⁴Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son."

Hebrews 13:1-2 NRSV

Let mutual love continue. ²Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

I was out of pastoral ministry for eight months in the early 1990s. We were living in Longmont, Colorado at the time. I was doing graduate work in biblical studies. I



was hoping to go into teaching. During that time, I regularly attended a Lutheran church in nearby Boulder. Week after week I was there. Would you believe that never once – in all eight months – did someone from the church actually come up and introduce themselves to me? Can I get an *awww* from the congregation?

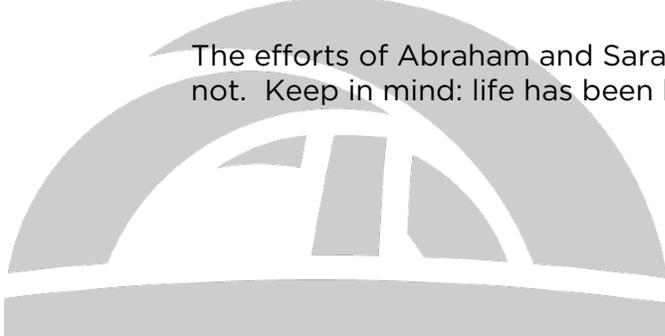
Now, I'm not shy, so I introduced myself. Even then, rarely did anyone come up the following week and welcome me back. It was a lonely experience. After a while, I found myself wondering, "Is something wrong with me? Is there any room for me in this church?"

Compare my experience with that of a young man who bought a cup of coffee at Starbucks this past week. Maybe you saw his story on social media. His name is Ibby and he happens to be deaf. Ibby has been deaf ever since he was injured in an accident when he was two-years-old. Every day he stops at Starbucks and orders his usual: caramel frappuccino.

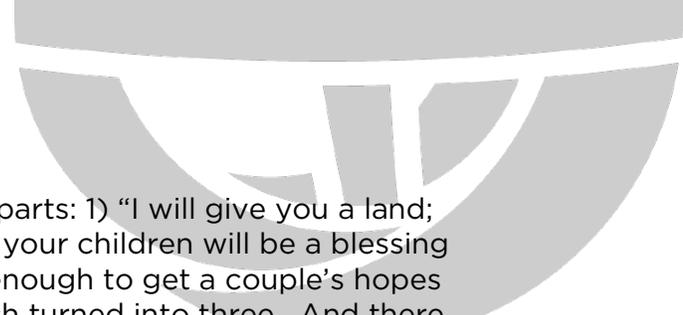
This week Ibby got a surprise. This is how he described it on Facebook: "I can't communicate like normal people, so I have the order written on my phone and show it to the cashier. They all mostly know my order by heart, so I rarely have to show it to them anymore. Today I was met by a cashier who handed me a note that said: 'I've been learning ASL – American Sign Language – so you can have the same experience as everyone else.' The cashier's name is Krystal Payne and after she handed me the note, she started signing to me, asking me what my order would be today. We chatted in sign for about 2 minutes. I learned that she had spent hours watching YouTube videos just so she could take my order the way she does for everyone else. I haven't felt so equal in all of my life."

So – a standoffish church in Boulder, Colorado or an incredibly helpful cashier at Starbucks – which experience sounds more like the story in Genesis 18? You know this story. Three men show up at the tent of Abraham and Sarah in the heat of the day. This might not sound like a big deal, but it is if it's 100 degrees in the shade and you're out in the middle of the desert. We're hearing this story in hindsight, of course, so we know that these are no ordinary visitors. But I doubt if it's clear to Abraham and Sarah. It's not as if the strangers have signs arounds their necks proclaiming them "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." There's no Trinitarian epiphany happening here. I imagine the strangers to be more like angels, messengers of the Lord, whatever that might mean.

As was customary, Abraham expends hospitality to these strangers. Before you know it, he's bringing water to wash their feet. He's hurrying to tell Sarah to bake some cakes. And then Abraham is looking over his herd and picking out a well-rounded calf for a bbq. Obviously, hospitality – making room for people to gather – was a big deal in that time and place. In fact, for travelers on the move, it was often a matter of life and death. Score one for a helpful cashier at Starbucks, because sometimes hospitality can feel like a matter of life and death for us too.



The efforts of Abraham and Sarah sound easy enough, but I'm guessing they're not. Keep in mind: life has been hard for these two. God made a promise to



Abraham years before. The promise came in three parts: 1) “I will give you a land; 2) I will make of you a great nation; and 3) You and your children will be a blessing to the whole world.” It was an incredible promise, enough to get a couple’s hopes up. And it did! Until one year turned into two, which turned into three. And there was no land. And there were no children. And there was no blessing whatsoever to share.

So now what? In today’s visit, the years of waiting had turned into decades. If you’ve ever gone through something similar, you know the sheer agony of waiting. Along the way, we learn that Sarah was barren. In a moment of desperation, she suggested that Abraham try having a child with her servant, Hagar. It worked. Ishmael was born. That made it even harder for Sarah.

More years went by. More disappointment. More heartache. What kind of promise is harder to believe than a promise that has not been kept? Beyond that, what kind of promise-maker is harder to believe than one who has continually not kept a promise?

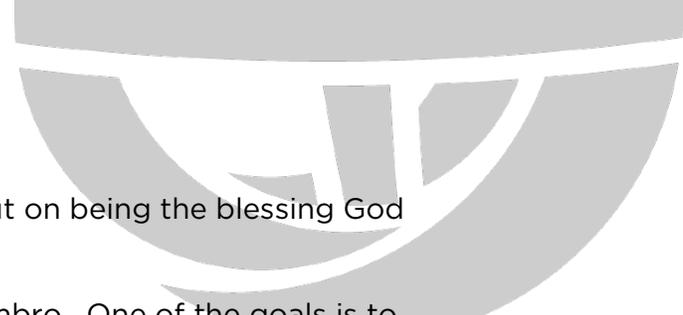
Today the promise is repeated by one of the strangers: “I will return in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.” Sarah overhears it. Suddenly she lets out a great big belly laugh. It’s not a funny laugh. It’s a cynical laugh. And it’s directed at God, and at the promise God keeps making, and is not keeping. As Sarah’s laughter dies away, it’s hard not to feel her pain. She’s scoffing: “Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?” The messenger asks in return: “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” You can almost see Sarah rolling her eyes. She’s afraid to start hoping again, clearly thinking there are plenty of things too wonderful for the Lord.

In the midst of this all-too-human drama, don’t miss the theme of hospitality just below the surface. It’s a critical part of the story. In the biblical world, hospitality was one of – if not *the* – chief social virtue. Hospitality was far more than a matter of being polite – it was a moral expectation, a sacred duty. It required that a person treat everyone like family (a least for a day and a night). Hebrews 13 picks up this theme, exhorting early Christians to “show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing, “some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

Do you see what’s going on here? The point of Genesis 18 is *not* that because Abraham and Sarah show hospitality, therefore God rewards them and keeps the promise after all. Rather, the point is that hospitality is the sacred duty and delight of all people who belong to God. Like Abraham and Sarah, we are blessed to be a blessing. And because we belong to God, when we encounter strangers, we are to receive them as people who already belong to us, and we are to welcome them as also belonging to God. That’s a tall order. The church in Boulder got it wrong. The cashier at Starbucks got it right. In a mysterious way, she created a moment of belonging for Ibby. *I haven’t felt so equal in all of my life.*



Here’s why it matters: When we don’t see people as belonging to us and also to God, we regularly miss out on angels who come our way. And we might miss out



on God. And when we miss out on God, we miss out on being the blessing God calls us to be.

We've got plans for building renovation here at Zumbro. One of the goals is to *extend our hospitality*. To do this, we will take down a few walls on the main floor and create larger gathering spaces. We want to make room. We believe in a God who creates space for people to gather, a God who wants us to show hospitality to strangers.

We're not living in the world of Abraham and Sarah anymore, but I think showing hospitality to strangers is as important as ever. More and more I hear of the epidemic of loneliness that's with us today. We don't go bowling together, or attend Lion's Club, or get together for coffee, or even go to church as much as we used to. This goes for youth and young adults too. Rather than connecting with each other, we get tied up with our phones and computers. If we have any community at all, it often happens online. There's nothing wrong with being online *to a point*, but when we are, we're not talking face to face, and listening to each other, and trying to work out our differences. Too often, our lack of connection is showing up in anxiety and depression...and loneliness.

What do you think - can we make a difference? In the story of Abraham and Sarah, God blesses them so they can be a blessing to others. Believing that God will show up and work through us is a radical act of faith, certainly not as radical as it was for Sarah, but radical enough. Believing that an act of hospitality can make any sort of difference in our world, takes faith. We reach out to strangers as part of our sacred duty and delight. It's as if we're entertaining angels, welcoming them as people who already belong to us, and welcoming them also as people who belong to God.

Showing hospitality to strangers is equally as important as we face the angry political divide in our country. This divide deeply troubles me. We would do well to turn off the angry voices on talk radio and television, and spend more time talking to folks at a restaurant, asking questions and really listening to each other. Too often our differences get painted like this: You're either for me or against me. You either love me or you hate me. In sharp contrast to the vitriol, we need to reclaim the biblical premise that every individual is created in the image of God, and they're created with dignity and worth.

Again, what do you think - can we make a difference? As with Abraham and Sarah, faith is a radical act. God wants us to treat others with dignity and respect. We are blessed to be a blessing. This shows up in our hospitality -our sacred duty and delight - reaching out to strangers, welcoming them as people who already belong to us, and welcoming them also as belonging to God.

I got an email from Pastor Norm Wahl at Bethel this past week. He was congratulating us on our building renovation project, wishing us the best as we go forward. In response, I thanked Norm and I asked him how the expanded gathering area at Bethel how impacted their congregational life. This is what he





wrote: “Immediately upon enter the new building, we had to alter our Sunday morning schedule because people gathered much longer and happier in the narthex. They created blessed bottlenecks. I can’t begin to tell you all the things that happen in the narthex every day of the week—welcoming, highlighting of ministries, video presentations, Community Food Response, rummage sales, senior exercise classes. It’s a versatile space that we can use for almost anything. Its value to Bethel is immense.”

Friends, we believe in a God who makes room for people to gather, whether at Bethel or Zumbro or beyond. If the story of Abraham and Sarah is any indication, God has a way of showing up in our lives, sometimes when we least expect it. The question is, will we extend hospitality to those who come, and will it make a difference? Believing, like Abraham and Sarah, that we are blessed to be a blessing, is radical act of faith. Yet, considering the loneliness in our world, and the sharpness of our political divide, hospitality is needed now more than ever. It sometimes feels like a matter of life and death. Here’s the challenge: As you welcome people into your life, welcome them as people who already belong to you, and welcome them also as belonging to God. You might be entertaining angels without know it. And they might walk away thinking, *I haven’t felt so equal in all of my life.* Amen.

